



**City of
Northampton**

Pamela Powers <ppowers@northamptonma.gov>

A Personal Testimony about Wage Theft in Northampton

1 message

Myra L. <myra.a.lam1@gmail.com>

Fri, Jul 15, 2016 at 2:25 PM

To: ppowers@northamptonma.gov

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Myra Lam, and I live at 22 Butler Place in Northampton. I am writing to follow up on a Northampton City Council hearing on the state of the downtown economy that I attended on Monday, June 27th. Attendees were encouraged to submit their experiences with wage theft to the City Council in writing, so that the Council could examine written testimonies as they deliberate about the proposed Wage Theft Ordinance. That's what I'd like to do today.

I originally moved to Northampton in 2007, to attend Smith College. Just before I graduated in 2011, I started working part-time as a hostess in an Asian restaurant on Main Street. I got the job because one of my Smith professors had introduced me to the restaurant owner. In total, I worked at the restaurant at its branches in both Northampton and Hadley for two years.

Most of my coworkers at the restaurant were immigrants who lived in the apartment provided by our boss. These workers, who were chefs, sous-chefs, dishwashers, and servers, regularly worked twelve to fourteen hours a day, and they didn't have structured breaks to my knowledge. Many workers would work for about two weeks straight (sometimes more) before they got a day or two off. I didn't ever hear of anyone receiving overtime pay.

I worked with one particularly hot-headed chef, who periodically quit his job in the middle of his shift. I once asked my boss, the restaurant's owner, what he did about that. My boss replied that he figured this would happen, and he usually just withheld the chef's paychecks until he could coax the chef to come back and work a couple more shifts. My boss didn't ask me to keep that a secret; he described his practice of wage theft in a rather matter-of-fact way. This makes me extrapolate that wage theft is, in some circles, considered a standard business practice rather than a crime.

Personally, I was usually paid promptly, and I always received what I earned. However, I was the only native English speaking, college-educated member of the staff, and my connection to my college professor likely safeguarded me from mistreatment at the restaurant. At the time, I didn't necessarily recognize my coworkers' working conditions as unjust and illegal. Likewise, even with my college education and relative access to resources, I didn't know that workers in their situation could file formal complaints with the state attorney general. This should explain why a relatively small number of formal cases have been filed in Northampton; workers often have no idea what process to follow to protect their rights.

By my understanding, the state attorney general is already overwhelmed with wage theft-related cases. Since the city government is more accessible to local workers, the City Council is uniquely well-suited to help enforce existing wage laws. I strongly urge the City Council to adopt a Wage Theft Ordinance, to help protect local workers and build a healthier, more ethical economy.

Please contact me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Myra Lam